

was another matter. In this capacity they appear, not solely as tribunals to administer the law, but as the spiritual guides of the individual conscience. Their jurisdiction was connected with the doctrine of Absolution. Every Christian was expected to repent, to confess his sin to the priest, and to perform such penance as his confessor directed. By these three acts he became purged of his sins. But many men, whether they repented or not, neither confessed to priests nor submitted to punishment. Such sinners were summoned before the Ecclesiastical Courts, convicted of their sin by witness, and condemned to the penance proper to the case. In this capacity the tribunal was acting its part in the system of Absolution. The sins over which the courts had jurisdiction had therefore originally been punished by corporal penance, and in the thirteenth century the Church had forbidden the courts to receive money in commutation. In the fourteenth century this rule, if it had ever been regularly enforced, was relaxed, and even the theory of those in authority was altered.¹ Fines for sin were allowed.

The change was a proof that the Church jurisdiction over sin was beginning to be out of place. Such jurisdiction had meaning and use in ages when the priest was the real moral authority. When the proudest of the Kings of England submitted to be flogged by the monks of Canterbury before the tomb of Becket, his subjects might be expected to submit to the infliction of penance by Bishops' courts. Now times had changed. He would have been a bold priest who proposed to scourge John of Gaunt for the murder of the knight in Westminster Abbey. Laymen such as those depicted in the *Canterbury Pilgrimage* would be less willing than their ancestors to humiliate themselves at the sentence of ecclesiastics whom they were accustomed to despise. Hence commutation of penance for fine may have arisen as much from the pride or self-respect of the laity as from the avarice of the clergy. However this may be, the change tended still further to reduce the real spiritual authority of the courts in their interference with private life. Such interference became an